

Moms, kids bond through Scouting prison program



Rachel Crain responds as her daughter, Millie Snyder, asks a question while mixing a slime concoction. Her son, Micah Snyder, is also participating in the science project during a Scouting activity at the Decatur Correctional Center. (Photo by Herald & Review/Lisa Morrison)



Carolyn Smith feels the slime which she created with her daughter, Acasia Cotton. (Photo by Herald & Review/Lisa Morrison)

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DECATUR — Olivia Weeks hung back at first.

Her reserve may have come from a desire not to look dumb, a big priority when you are 13. Or it might have been the unfamiliar setting in the large classroom of the Decatur Women's Correctional Center.

But whatever the cause, the mask was off long before her first Girl Scout session with her mom was over Saturday, and she was mixing up slime with the best of them, not seeming to care if her fingers stayed blue for the Sadie Hawkins dance she was going to last night at West Frankfort Junior High.

More importantly as Olivia and her mother worked on science experiments together, they were able to have the best conversation they've had since Tabitha Weeks arrived at the prison a year ago.

"Even though there are other people here, it's nice to have so much time just with her," Weeks said.

The pair were among a group of five mothers and seven children who participated Saturday in a monthly Scouting Beyond Bars program begun two years ago by the correctional center, Lincoln Trails Council Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts of Central Illinois.

The purpose is to maintain the bond between mother and child during the woman's prison sentence and introduce them to an activity they can continue after they are reunited in the community.

The program came together through the efforts of Steve Spaide, an administrative assistant at the prison, Bob Larson, Boy Scouts district director, and Vicki Harber-Wheeler, Girl Scouts program director.

Leadership alternates between the two Scouting organizations, with Sonja Chargois, program specialist with the Girl Scouts, leading Saturday's session with help from Donald Johnson, a Scoutreach program aide for the Boy Scouts.

"We think we have one of the few programs like this and maybe the only one that's a collaboration between Girl and Boy Scouts," Larson said in a telephone interview.

Spaide said none of the program's original participants is incarcerated any longer, and three of the five moms and their children were experiencing Scouting Beyond Bars for the first time Saturday.

Rachel Crain of Salem said she liked being able to give her undivided attention to her children — Micah and Millie Snyder, ages 7 and 6. In the visiting room, by contrast, she must spend part of their time together chatting with the adult who brought them and keeping their behavior within stricter limits.

Carolyn Smith of Decatur and her 13-year-old daughter. Acasia Cotton, meanwhile, said they were having a blast and got to talking about the science experiments the teenager has been doing at school. “I like experiments better than worksheets,” Acasia said.

Eva Capers of Decatur said she has been doing the program with her children — Taurus Barbee, 7, and Anijah Clemmons, 5 — since May and gets far more from her son than the one- or two-word answers he gives in the visiting room.

“If I ask him how school was this week, he’ll say, ‘It’s fun,’ ” Capers said. “In here, he’ll go, ‘Oh Ma, we did this Tuesday at school.’”

Anijah is far less reticent, expressing her preference for a glue bottle with a blue cap, cautioning her brother not to eat the slime and going right up to Chargois to ask for help making a bouncy ball.

Fully engaged by the end of the session, Olivia came close to putting too much Alka-Selzer inside the lava lamp she fashioned out of a plastic bottle filled with water, cooking oil and red and blue food coloring.

“This is fine,” she said with a grin. “It’s cool to see the inside of this place.”